Author’s response to reviews

Title: The sustainability of public health interventions in schools: a systematic review

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Version: 2 Date: 02 Oct 2019

Author’s response to reviews:

Mr Paul Wilson
Professor Michel Wensing
Editors-in-Chief
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2nd October 2019

Dear Mr Wilson and Professor Wensing

Thank you for considering our manuscript “Sustaining public health interventions in schools: a systematic review of facilitators and barriers,” (IMPS-D-19-00331).

The peer reviewers raised very helpful points and we are thankful for the opportunity to strengthen the paper. We address each comment in turn:

- The research question posed by the authors related to the barriers and facilitators of sustainment. I think the authors actually address more than this, and also consider the evidence of sustainment of school-based health interventions (e.g. what evidence exists, what quality is it, what does this evidence reveal about the success of sustainment). The research question could be expanded to include this element of the study.

We have included the additional research questions in the abstract on p.1 and at the end of the background section on p. 4. We have amended the title of the paper to reflect the fact the paper is not solely focused on facilitators and barriers (p.1). We have added text on the evidence base and findings on overall sustainability into the summary of the findings on p.19.

- I think the paper would be strengthened by consideration of how sustainment in schools might differ to sustainment in healthcare - or to what extend issues are similar (e.g. turnover of staff). To support a comparison it may be helpful to cross-reference to Lennox et al review of sustainability models and their consolidated framework for sustainability constructs in healthcare. This could also help frame practical considerations e.g. as to whether existing sustainability models/tools are likely to
be of use in school settings or whether their requirements differ substantially.

We have drawn out key differences between health and education that stem from the review studies and revised the discussion accordingly on p.19-21.

- At times, the authors use the terms "sustainment" and "sustainability," but it is unclear if they are doing so intentionally. If not, I suggest they stick with a single term. Since it seems the review was interested in variables associated with whether or not sustainment occurred (rather than the potential for sustainment; i.e., "sustainability"), I suggest that they use the term "sustainment."

We agree that it would be clearer to stick with a single term. However, we have chosen to use the term sustainability as it is the one most commonly used in the literature and does encompass the actuality rather than merely the potential for interventions to be sustained (for example, in Lennox et al, 2018, Stirman et al, 2012). We have also amended the term used in Tables 1, 2, 4 and 5.

- In the Method, the authors note that interventions were excluded if they "involved collocating a health service within schools." This exclusion criterion should be more fully operationalized for the reader, given how common it is for health services to be delivered in schools by externally-employed providers. For instance, this has been documented to be the most common administrative relationship for the provision of mental health services in schools (Foster et al., 2005).


We have clarified this term for the reader on p.5.

- On page 7, the authors indicate that they used a meta-ethnographic approach "as submitted in the protocol," but it is unclear to which protocol they are referring. The citation in the sentence does not appear to be a published study protocol paper.

We have inserted the citation for the protocol.

- Did the authors explicitly gather any information on the implementation or sustainment strategies that were used in the studies? In addition to assessing barriers and facilitators, an accounting of the specific implementation strategies used in the included studies seems to be highly relevant to the study objectives. The authors might consider reviewing the studies using an established compilation of strategies, such as the Expert Recommendations for Implementation Change (ERIC) compilation (Powell et al., 2015), or its school-adapted counterpart (Cook et al., 2019).


Some but not all papers referred to specific sustainability strategies in their introduction/background
sections. If authors commented on these strategies in their results or discussion about sustainability, we extracted these comments as data and included them in our analysis. But we did not set out to extract data on all the implementation and sustainability strategies employed and papers did not consistently report these as part of their results. Give this, and that the paper is already at the word limit, and given that it would be a significant deviation from our published protocol, we propose not to include a new section of the results systematically reviewing what strategies were used and which if any were associated with better sustainability. However, we have discussed how sustainability strategies featured in our analysis and highlighted where further research is needed in “Implications for research and policy” on p.22.

- Overall, the manuscript would be strengthened if the authors could comment on where the major determinants of sustainment they have identified align with those previously detailed for initial implementation in schools or other service sectors. This may be best done as a point in the discussion section that could incorporate findings from studies examining the initial implementation phase.

We have amended our discussion as suggested to summarise where factors are applicable to both implementation and sustainability in the discussion on lines 555 -556, 564 and 567.

With these additions, the word count is now 6108. It will be difficult to lower the word count but we can attempt this if you require it.

Finally, we have made minor corrections to Table 4 to improve clarity and consistency. Table 5 “Intervention adaptation and integration” included a sub-theme from an earlier stage in the analysis. We have removed it from the table, which now appropriately matches the main manuscript.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

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